

Partnering with Stakeholders to Improve Student Achievement

Epstein and Salinas offer some compelling reasons to create inclusive learning communities in our schools. They suggest six types of involvement schools can embrace as part of their school-improvement planning process to enhance student achievement: parenting, communicating, learning at home, decision making, and collaboration (Epstein and Salinas, 2004). Their examples illustrate the power of partnerships in supporting and improving student achievement.

This text will examine the need to expand on these ideas by asking educators to embrace systems thinking and to reevaluate who we engage in conversations about teaching and learning. It will invite readers to think within and beyond the school gates to define the school system and its stakeholders. Readers will consider different ways to engage stakeholders and to communicate results. The sense of urgency for most schools is real; we need to advance student achievement in unprecedented ways, in a short time frame, and we need to garner all the support available to us to achieve this goal. We must invite stakeholders to assess the current reality and to create a collective vision of what they want our schools to be. However, vision is not enough; we must collaborate to translate that vision into commitment and action (Dufour, 2004).

Who are our partners?

If we are to move beyond structural change toward cultural change and sustainability, we need to communicate with our partners in new ways. This will mean rethinking with whom we meet, how those meetings are conducted, and how we share information across the current boundaries of our system of schooling. The first step is to identify logical stakeholders in the business of schooling. Some obvious groups that can be readily identified are: ♦educators, students, parents and community partners♦ (Epstein and Salinas, 2004).

Some overlooked groups within our schools can also provide us with insight and wisdom about ways we can create a learning environment that allows for the success of all students. These groups are found in our own buildings, but are seldom engaged in conversations about teaching and learning. These groups may include: students, assistant principals, related arts teachers, career and technical teachers, instructional and special education aides, outdoor play supervisors, school security officers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodial staff. These people care about, interact with, and reach students every day. They may have insights that can help us round out our knowledge of the students in our classrooms. Their perspectives could help teachers better serve all students, yet many of these school community members are not part of school improvement or strategic planning initiatives in our schools.

External stakeholder groups might include: textbook publishers and vendors, politicians, taxpayers, local scout masters, recreational sports coaches, police officers, clergy, social service agency personnel, medical professionals, librarians, and neighborhood watch associations. These stakeholders have perspectives about students outside the school. Some see our students in activities they are passionate about, while others see our students with their families and in their neighborhoods. We need their perspectives to truly know the students who sit before us.

How often have you seen a group representing some, or all, of these stakeholders assembled to talk about and plan for successful schools? Our task of achieving proficiency for all students is venerable. How will we tackle this task and who will be involved?

We currently tend to stay in the perceived safety of our traditional same-role silos and try to manage the load alone. The load is growing bigger than any one group can bear. Reaching across boundaries seems a logical way to proceed in order to create the kind of learning environment in which all our students can and will succeed.

How do we engage our partners?

Once we identify our partners, we need to find meaningful ways to engage them in a collaborative process. Group members will participate to the degree they feel included, according to their perceived sphere of influence in the group and the value they attach to their ability to contribute to the group. Our challenge is to make sure all group members feel equally invited to be instrumental members. (Weisbord, 2004)

The first step in creating a well-functioning learning group is to ensure that the participants have a common language and shared concern about the mission, vision, and tasks of the group. Within our profession, we often have a common language, and we assume shared concern about a particular strategy or practice that isn't there. Few of us take the time to check on understanding and rely on vocabulary as our sole means of comprehension. Neglecting to create shared concerns can result in conflicting messages sent to stakeholders about a particular initiative or innovation.

For example, many schools are implementing walk-throughs as a professional development design. While some district and school leaders see this as a way for principals and supervisors to gauge the climate of the school or the implementation of an initiative on an ongoing basis, other school and district leaders use a one-time, checklist strategy to rate a school's progress in order to place them in corrective action. They also call this practice a walk-through. The term walk-through can have very different interpretations depending on the participants' assumptions, perceptions, purposes, and intended outcomes.



We cannot assume that presenting or imposing a new idea without assuring shared understanding about what that idea will look and sound like, once implemented well, will yield the results we are looking for: increased student achievement. Shared meaning leads

to mutual ownership, something every new initiative needs to find success and an eventual place in institutional history.

How do we sustain momentum toward eventual institutionalization of an innovation?

Checking for understanding on an ongoing basis is critical for the success of any new initiative or innovation in a school. Stakeholders engaged in an innovation cycle must understand change as a process, not an event.

Every initiative has three phases: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. Ideally the initiation phase is given time and attention to ready the school community for the initiative, whether it is a textbook adoption, a schedule change, or the introduction of a new position in the school. While the initiation phase needs attention, too much attention on this phase can lead to frustration and apathy.

The implementation phase of an initiative is the time to  just do it.  During this phase, teachers must be encouraged to try the new strategy or use the new materials multiple times. Encouraging reflection and correction during this phase is critical. Implementers need to feel safe while developing capacity. This is the time to celebrate progress and distance traveled. Highlight successes at every meeting and in home and school publications during this phase of an initiative's development (Collins, 2001).

The final phase of the initiative comes with institutionalization of the innovation. At this phase all members of the school community recognize the initiative or practice as part of the culture of the school. Attention is paid to recruiting new members who are familiar with the strategy or process or are willing to learn. Reflection is an integral part of this phase too. Regular evaluation of school culture will confirm that the adopted process or strategy is still serving the needs of the learning community.

Hord and Hall's Concerns Based Adoption Model (C-BAM) is a tool that is useful to gauge whether an initiative is needed or taking hold in a learning community. The model measures the levels of concern about an innovation as well as the levels of use by employing innovation configuration maps (ICs). The IC is a rubric-like tool to help a learning community reflect at each stage of an implementation process. ICs can be developed for each stakeholder group depending on their involvement in the initiative. More detailed information about innovation configuration maps and the C-BAM model can be found at SEDL's website, www.sedl.org.

Many initiatives enjoy initial enthusiasm and success among implementers, only to experience an implementation dip as time moves forward (Fullan, 2001). An implementation dip is a predictable part of any new initiative. It occurs when participants lose interest due to inattention and support, and revert back to their comfortable habits. Using tools like ICs can help identify and address the concerns that cause the shift in enthusiasm for an initiative.

For example, a local high school is implementing SSR (sustained silent reading) for the first

time. The first half of the school year is spent providing professional learning opportunities for the teachers, assembling students, and conducting informational sessions for parents and community members. Also included are school board resolutions, assessments for student reading levels, surveys of students, parents and teachers about literary interests, materials acquisitions for the classrooms and libraries, and schedule adjustment to allow for 20 additional minutes to be added to periods five and six every other day. The stage is set for SSR to begin after winter break. It is launched with great success and students are regularly reading books of high interest at their independent reading levels. This energy lasts through the end of the school year with students reading an impressive number of books by the end of the year. Teachers report success stories based on data from formative and summative assessments. Everyone is happy as they leave for summer vacation.

Over the summer, several teachers retire or leave the district. September comes, and the administration expects SSR to take off at the level it ended in June. They check this matter off their to-do list. As they tour the building in September and October, they are disappointed to see fewer classes engaged in SSR and wonder what happened.

Implementation dips often occur with change in leadership or a shift in staff. Without constant monitoring and attending to the details of an initiative—the training and support needed for new staff, support and supplies needed for successful implementation, its place on staff and student agendas, and celebrations of successes—initiatives may never get out of the dip to become institutionalized best practices. Experiencing too many initiatives stuck in the dip may cause learning community members to be cynical about progressive thinking.

How do we shift the culture?

To best serve today's youth, instruction must embrace a continuum of strategies to reach all learners. Emphasis is moving away from rote memorization toward authentic learning experiences and assessments. These experiences tap into students' schema and help them connect their learning to real life, while guiding them to see relevancy in that learning.

Most stakeholders come to the table with a lifetime of experience in the teacher-tell-and-student-listen model of instruction (Dufour, 2004 p.178). In order to compel them to accept and adopt 21st Century instructional practices, they need to have positive experiences in using them with students and as students. Inclusive stakeholder meetings convened to plan innovation processes in schools must be designed to model the practices we are asking teachers and other stakeholders to embrace. For example, participants need to have the opportunity to work in groups of various sizes with members they do not usually encounter. They need to have tasks that require creativity and collaboration, and outcomes that are tangible and readily replicated. Opportunity for reflection must also be part of every meeting.

Aronson and Steil have distilled the Big 8 principles and the 8 also big principles of successful large group meetings from *The Handbook of Large Group Methods*, by Bunker and Alban. These principles are:

- Clarity of purpose
- Active engagement, around real work and real decisions
- System complete within the room
- Development of a shared understanding of context
- Self-management of working groups
- Discovery of common ground
- Focus on the future
- Equal standing of participants

And ♦

- Open (visible) data and data bases
- Experience of the equal humanness of all participants
- Transparent decision making
- Full attendance (Each time a group changes participants, it is a new group.)
- Development of group perspectives from individual data
- Knowledge within the people
- Conflict rationalization
- Length of meeting is proportional to the breadth and complexity of purpose and the degree of system fragmentation (Aronson and Steil, 2006)

Designers of any large group meeting of school stakeholders should hold these principles constant in order to create successful meeting designs that result in concerted action and that create coherence ♦ the extent to which the school ♦ s programs for students and stakeholders are coordinated, focused on learning goals, and sustained over a period of time (Fullan, 2001). Principals, teacher leaders, and professional learning coordinators will find these principles useful as they begin to create inclusive learning communities.

What does professional learning need to be in our schools to achieve our goals?

Both students and teachers need time to share their learning with one another. They need the opportunity to share and grow with colleagues if they are expected to develop new habits of practice in today ♦ s classrooms. The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) endorses a structure called Critical Friends Groups, or CFG, as a way to gather teachers in small groups to talk about such topics as students ♦ work, classroom dilemmas, or teaching successes in a structured conversation designed to accomplish the task at hand in a limited amount of time. These groups are ongoing and stress reflection and action. For further information about CFGs and protocols please visit www.nsrffharmony.org.

Many professional learning designs achieve the ideal professional practice in schools, which can be described as getting teachers together to talk about teaching and learning in a regular and meaningful way, which leads to action that will positively affect student achievement. The challenge is to sustain the enthusiasm and commitment of time required for these ongoing reflective sessions. Other responsibilities can begin to erode the time set

aside for this professional learning unless it is firmly established and valued by the learning community. In other words, professional learning and collaboration are part of the culture in schools where this work is sustained.

What do these strategies and principles look like in practice?

The most prevalent collection of stories from the field that illustrate sustained improvement comes from the literature about professional learning communities. This literature endorses many of the practices suggested here, but the focus in PLCs is on specific stakeholder groups within the school. A culture that supports learning for all; collegial and collaborative practices; transparency of data; and action orientation are all concepts shared in the PLC stories and the scenarios below. The difference is that the compiled common dilemmas that follow include examples of how multiple stakeholder groups could collaborate to create viable solutions.

High Stakes Testing

Stakes are high for today's schools. Achievement is measured by a single snapshot of a moment in time, which is the state standardized test. This fact should be compelling educators to partner with any and all stakeholders to create the kind of rigorous educational experiences our students need to succeed on this and other measures of achievement throughout their school careers. Instead, we tend to try to solve the problem alone and often create a learning environment where students practice using a facsimile of a testing instrument, not learning to problem-solve by using a variety of assessment tools and strategies. Opportunities to work with other students, to solve problems and create original works are sacrificed in order to prepare for the TEST.

Teachers must be afforded the opportunity to discover how rigorous learning activities and thoughtful questioning throughout the year will support students' achievement on state tests and connect students to their learning. When students are connected to their learning and expectations are made transparent, they will understand the import of the state assessment and work hard to perform their best.

One way to achieve this experience is to design professional learning that has teachers working together to design lessons that include authentic common assessment. Once data is collected, teachers can share this data with colleagues, students, and parents. Analyzing this data will be the task of the group, not just the teacher. Students can then be given the opportunity to edit or correct their assignment and reassess their comprehension. These kinds of experiences are what Stiggins calls assessment for learning. Assessment for learning offers all students the possibility of success and a means of celebrating that success (Stiggins, 2002).

Transitions

Students experience many transitions in their K-12 careers. Articulation among

stakeholders at each of these junctures can make the transition smoother for students, parents, and teachers. Much time and energy is lost if students don't understand and embrace expectations at the next level. Even more time is lost if mixed messages are conveyed by any of the stakeholders. Taking time to check understanding at each stage of the journey can serve to forge a more coherent experience for all stakeholders involved.

For example, in a district that serves three levels of schooling, structures need to be in place for K-12 curricular conversations; study groups to study data and share with study groups at other levels; and teams that support the details of the transition at each level. All of these collaborations need to be ongoing for transition to become less of a potential hazard and more of a natural condition. Too often these details are not attended to. One level doesn't know the expectation from the next level or how to prepare their students adequately for success. When this occurs, those that suffer most are the students.

One way to remedy this confusion is to hold a large group, community-based meeting inviting internal and external stakeholders to participate in a process to develop a district wide transition plan. This planning team may propose turning the district's schedule upside down, having the elementary students starting first and the high school students starting their day later. They may create a system of cross-level ambassadors who are advocates for their level at district council meetings convened regularly to check the progress of the plan. Whatever the group determines, the powers who requested they construct this plan must be ready to give serious consideration to the group's recommendations. If their hard work is dismissed, participants will disengage and perhaps even undermine the community.

Basic Skills vs. Rigor

Many argue that students still need to learn basic skills in order to succeed with higher order learning. Fundamentals are indeed necessary at every level for students to succeed. Basic skills practice, direct teacher delivery systems, and memorization activities are still viable strategies in some circumstances. However, they cannot define a teacher's practice or a student's experience if we want to engage all students to achieve at high levels. Teachers and students must see learning as a process that has checkpoints along the way to measure understanding. Teachers must value alternate assessment strategies such as: project-based learning, creative student presentations of learning, or other processes that illustrate student understanding of content. Students must be given multiple opportunities to demonstrate and celebrate understanding. One way to include multiple stakeholders would be to invite them to be part of the audience when students present their culminating projects or presentations.

Opportunities to write several times a day will help students improve their written communication skills. Frequent opportunities to read texts of high interest at an independent reading level will help students improve reading stamina. Reteaching material to a classmate or retelling a story will help a student refine his or her comprehension skills. Asking students to *stop and jot* or *think, pair, and share* will help students take time needed to clarify their own thinking before sharing with the group. *Think alouds* will make the teacher's thinking visible to students and offer them expert strategies to try in their own learning. These opportunities to write, read, talk, and think help students develop habits of mind that will

increase their engagement in learning and improve their achievement in school and on standardized tests. All of these strategies provide rigor and differentiation while giving students time to practice basic skills. Stakeholders should be aware of the rationale for using a variety of instructional strategies and the effect that using these strategies will have on student achievement. Opening the school on a regular basis so community members, parents, administrators and others can observe rigorous learning in action is another way to communicate instructional priorities to all stakeholders.

Now what?

Including multiple stakeholders in school governance and planning processes can offer a school community perspectives that might never have been accessed in previous planning, but that provide insights which could positively impact student learning and achievement. Inclusivity and transparency are new concepts in most schools and school systems. Becoming proficient at designing meetings and structures that support inclusive practices and openly share and consider data will take time, study, and practice. Shifting educational cultures to embrace these strategies in the classroom, in the faculty room, and in the Board room will mirror the learning cycle we ask our students and teachers to espouse and endorse every day. We need to create the space for our learning communities to learn, try, reflect, make course corrections, try, and reflect again. Creating this safe and rigorous learning community is what we need to do so that all our students are successful in 21st Century classrooms, and so that all stakeholders develop shared meaning and understanding of the expectations for performance and achievement in these classrooms.

Resources

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